

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #306

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Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Mike Caldwell, the current founder and CEO of LinkedLeaders. Mike, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Mike Caldwell:

Annalies, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Really excited to have this conversation. Anytime we get to talk about leadership and how we do more, um, with that is a super exciting conversation. So, let's set a bit of context for our listeners as we get started. LinkedLeaders is a subscription-based platform designed to support K12 school leaders everywhere. Through a community of highly experienced and talented veteran school leaders, they leverage web-based technology to offer live one-on-one mentoring, coaching, and master classes to school leaders who are isolated, overwhelmed, frustrated, or just stretched thin. LinkedLeaders exist to keep great leaders leading schools and to help good leaders become great.

Like, everybody can agree, that's super awesome. So let's start high level. One of the questions I always like to ask especially when I get the opportunity to talk to founders, and my listeners know this, founding things is hard. I mean, this work is hard regardless, but let's start with the sort of 100,000-foot view. What were you thinking, Mike?

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah. I know, I reflect back over the last year and a half since this journey began. I don't think I knew what I was getting into, is the short answer. And it's just kind of progressively led me to where we are today but I don't think I had the vision up front, at least, to... I didn't know I was starting a business at the time. How about that when it started.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, I think that's fair.

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah. But here we are.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. Here we are. I mean, as a founder myself, I can absolutely echo that. I had really no idea what it meant. It was like, "Oh, this is a great idea. This is the thing we really need to do. So, okay, I'm willing to roll up my sleeves and do that," without really understanding what does it mean later. For me, 26 years later, here we are. So, there's a lot ahead, Mike, so I'll say that, but appreciate that very much.

As we really sort of think about the work, and again, I mentioned I was excited that we get to have a conversation about school leadership, you're absolutely right, it's a tough space to be in. The pressures are enormous. So, let's talk a little bit about the sort of the why. When you think about "I'm gonna start a thing that's about community and providing support to folks that are literally stretched to almost nothing some days." So, talk to us a little bit about the sort of the why this thing and why now?

Mike Caldwell:

So, first and foremost, a little bit of background. I'm a former high school principal, longtime educator and leader in different capacities in my time in education. And about two, I guess almost three years ago, I retired from my principalship without a plan of what I was going to do, but ended up landing at a nonprofit organization that I work with charter schools in my home state.

And so, I began working with charter school leaders. Charters was new to me, so that wasn't my background. But working with school leaders mostly in rural areas in our state that were either founding schools or had existing schools that were, oftentimes, just single site leaders, single site schools.

While I was doing that, in my first year doing that, I just want to share the genesis story of kind of where this all came from because I think it captures both the why and the why now essence of it. But on October 2nd, 2024, to be exact, I was at home scrolling through one of these principal Facebook groups that exist. There's several out there, right? And I was noticing kind of this reoccurring theme of, I don't know, desperation, doom and gloom, just a lot of like anonymous posts from school leaders talking about whether they could even make it to the end of the month, planning on resigning at the end of the semester, families falling apart, health's falling apart. It was just sad, right?

And I recognize as a former school principal how challenging the job was. But I also recognize that early October is usually the sweet spot. Like, I actually find that as kind of a magic time to be a school leader, and it's maybe less stressful than other times. So, it was also additionally kind of concerning that this was October 2nd, and these were the feelings.

So, I made a post that evening and just said "Former high school principal currently working with school leaders. If you want to just connect, send me a direct message on Facebook, and we'll connect. We'll set something up. I'm not looking for anything in return, but would be happy to have a 30-minute conversation with you or whatever and see if that can help offer perspective or whatever else." And after I made that post, I went back and looked. In about less than 10 minutes, I had to go back and edit the post and say, "I'm full. I'm booked." It was overwhelming, like how immediately the response was. And so, that was like, "Oh, okay. Wow."

So, I started meeting with school leaders, um, from really all over the country and a handful from outside of the country just having conversations. And a couple things occurred to me during that kind of first month. One is there's obviously a need here that maybe is not being met. And two is as I'm meeting with some of these school leaders, I don't think I'm the best fit for all of them. I've spent most of my time in high school. I'm meeting with a school leader that's in her third year as an elementary school principal in a large public school district, and I'm meeting with a school leader in India that I've never led or been in an international school of any kind.

And so, then, the idea was, well, what if there was a way just to kind of remove the friction of scheduling or that where we didn't have to wait for somebody to make a post on Facebook that people like Nicole or Deepika or whoever else I was meeting

with could just go find somebody that's closer to their context and connect with them without a lot of hassle or, or challenge. So, that's kind of where the idea of LinkedLeaders evolved. Started recruiting some of the, my closest colleagues that I trusted in leadership, and then they helped connect others, and by January 1st, we kind of launched this I don't know, call it an MVP in the startup world, but kind of connected with a mentorship platform that I licensed and a WordPress website that I threw together and 25 people that were available for others. And so, that was kind of the beginning. It's evolved tremendously since then, but that's kind of the beginning of what is now LinkedLeaders.

Annalies Corbin:

And I really do love and appreciate that. And particular, what I was most struck by was the realization, and I wanted to just applaud this and say it out loud, the realization and just owning the space that says, "I'm not gonna be the perfect source for everyone," that is very counter to many business plans for starters. And so, I just also think that it brings to the work that you're doing a level of authenticity and realness that we don't always see. So, I just wanna say thank you for that because I think that's a pretty amazing choice that you made.

I wanna talk about the way you've structured that human library piece. And I'm curious and this is not to put you on the spot, but I'm super curious how much of that concept is tied to the community share work around human library and application of human library more broadly in education space? And the answer, it may not be related at all, and if that's the case, that's awesome. So, why did you come to that?

Mike Caldwell:

Well, I think when we go and we seek wisdom or knowledge, we're obviously going to a source that contains that. A library is the most analog example, right? You go to a library and you check out a book 'cause you're seeking information or you just wanna read a story or you wanna connect with whatever is in that book, and you check it out for a while to get what you need out of it, and then you put it back on the shelf, right?

So, I'm maybe not familiar with a different context of the idea of a human library, but that's kind of how I see our mentorship hub is it's really like, I need this type of support right now, and so checking out a book, I'm gonna go book 30 minutes with Annalies or whoever else, or maybe it's an hour, and I have that conversation, that mentorship call or the coaching call. And my context and my needs might change in a month or in a year, or maybe I didn't really connect with that person the way I thought I would. So, having choice to go back and connect with somebody else.

I know for me, as a school leader, I had kind of a built-in mentor that wasn't even assigned to me as a mentor, but I certainly saw that person as my mentor. But that wasn't the only person that I would go to for support. It kind of depended on the situation and where I was as a leader. And so, I think, sometimes, we can get assigned a mentor, and that could be a great fit, and I think that relationship is really important. But sometimes, having kind of that choice also provides value where you get to identify who and what you need at the time.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that, and I appreciate that very much because I think that that's very, very true. We've all had those experiences where we've encountered individuals who their insight, their opinions, their experience are so tangible to us that we go to them over and over again. Even years later, "Hey, I had this thought. What do you think?" It could be as simple as that, and I have to send a message, and I have to wait for somebody to reply. And so, I do also really like the way you structured this because I think it really makes sense into solving problems right now.

With that in mind, I'm really curious, this has been up and going for about a year or so now, what are you seeing? 'Cause I have no doubt you're seeing trends. So, what is the thing or maybe the two or three things that you're seeing more and more frequently or a greater urgency around? I'm really curious about the things that are top of mind for folks that they're tapping into LinkedLearning to be able to - link leaders to be able to get.

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah, good question. There's a couple things that come to mind from that question. One, - what came to mind initially is kind of how we've evolved structurally. Leaders, school leaders in particular or district leaders for that matter have at least one thing in common, and that is time is not on their side. There's so much to do, and there's never enough time. And many of them also belong to existing organizations, whether it's a district or an association or whatever else.

So, one of the things, decisions we made a few months ago as we launched the new platform in September was rather than trying to create a separate community for LinkedLeaders where they already exist, yes, that's certainly available, but we created the platform to be in the technical world, multi-tenant, where we could actually go to existing organizations, associations, and provide the same type of infrastructure that we have for LinkedLeaders that we built kind of for the one-off individual leader for their entire organization because what I'm seeing and what I've noticed is many of these associations exist with very limited capacity, but yet are trying to serve hundreds if not thousands of members in their organization.

And they all have... - I think there's a lot of need out there to provide support. If that organization is structured to try to provide support, but they don't have the infrastructure to do so, that becomes kind of, I think, a missing opportunity.

And so, where we have evolved as an organization from LinkedLeaders is actually developing partnerships with those types of associations where, yes, they still get access to our kind of global human library and the events that we put on with our fireside chats and master classes. But if an organization wants to come on board, they could actually have their own space within LinkedLeaders to really scale what most of them are trying to do anyway. Mentorship is a big initiative for most organizations, but they typically lack the infrastructure to do that at scale. And so, that's one of the things that we've noticed. It's kind of a need where we've evolved.

But to get at the more granular level at the school leader side where we're evolving is switching to a certain extent from here's this kind of wide open kind of platform for you to go and find a mentor or to engage with peers in a fireside chat, to starting with what we're calling it kind of challenge-based journeys, where what we're working on right now is school leaders will come in, and they have an option to kind of start with where they're challenged, if you will, as a leader, whatever that might be, and that our platform will kind of guide them towards support on the platform for whether it's a recommended mentors or some upcoming events that are happening, or even resources that can kind of help them for that particular area.

So, that's something maybe we missed early on is maybe just providing... It's almost paralysis by analysis, maybe too many options. And so, we're trying to kind of zone that down to starting with really what-- You're probably here because you're stretched or challenged or isolated or whatever the case may be. So, let's start there, and let us help you, kind of guide you to some support.

Annalies Corbin:

So, I love that. And I can see where that would be insanely valuable for the folks that are opting in. I also really love the fact that you've crafted the opportunity for organizations or districts, that multi-tenant approach. I think you call it suites in looking through. So, I also think that there's a lot of deep value in that.

I'm curious about as more organizations or, in particular, more districts or schools were to opt into that, is there a mechanism that then allows folks within the community to be able to opt in as well? And what I'm thinking about is mentorship. Mentorship needs to come from a variety of different places. And often, we find the most successful, either transformations as a leader, and I want to be really careful about that phrase because that's not really what we mean, what we're talking about here is

this idea that I have a problem, I'm stretched too thin, I'm overwhelmed, all of those pieces and parts we talked about earlier, right? And the solution for me is, really, want to balance in many ways, and balance means figuring out how to manage my workload, how to manage my people, how to interact in my community in a different kind of way.

And so, what I'm really ultimately looking for, and I think this is the reason why the library approach appealed to me, is to your point, I need a piece of this, and I need a piece of this, and I need a piece of this. And it's never gonna be a singular individual, most likely, that can provide me with all the things that I need. But in addition to needing experts in those particular areas, I also need the expertise and understanding from my own community to help me fully achieve that wholeness. How do you approach that?

So I'm an educator in Boise, which is where you're based, right? And I need to have access to some of my community members in addition to, and ideally as a school district who's opted into utilizing this platform that's already been built, how do I tap into that element as well as the specific educational expertise, or can I?

Mike Caldwell:

What comes to mind as you ask the question is something that we're also kind of evolving into, and we kind of have elements of that, and that is what started the human library or in our leadership hub as kind of peer connection where I could go connect with another school leader that maybe just has 20 more years experience than me or whatever, or maybe I'm actually connecting with a professional leadership coach, whatever it might be, is there are others, whether it's in your community or outside your community, that have perspective or expertise in areas that help build your overall support system that may not be in the leadership or in the K-12 space at all.

So, for example, we have [Alison Ooten] on our platform. She's never worked in a school, but she is a PR communications expert. And sometimes, especially in these smaller rural areas, and you're going through a crisis or you're trying to pass a bond or a levy for your district, and sometimes you just need some external advice and support on communication as an example.

Annalies Corbin:

And that's a great example. Yeah, 100%. Those are perfect.

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah. And so, whether it's at the global level for LinkedLeaders or at the local level, it's

a platform where you can bring in those types of contacts and build an entire library of different genres, if you will. Yeah, one genre is peer leadership support. Another genre is I need tech expertise or AI guidance or whatever it might be.

And so, that's where I think also the kind of local, again, back to the multi-tenant structure comes into play as an individual or as an organization. I can say, "This is who I want to put in my library." And they have that autonomy. We have the structure, but they can build that however they may. While at the same time, with a click of the button, they go to kind of the global LinkedLeaders, and they still have access to the larger library, if you will.

So, yeah. So, I don't know if that gets at your question, but I think it is important that as leaders that we're not just looking for support within our own kind of circle of peers, but there is this greater kind of circle of support that's out there that may not be showing up to a school every day, but could certainly provide value to you as a school leader.

Annalies Corbin:

100%. 100%. And those same values then translate into what's happening in our classrooms, our educators, not just our leaders, and then ultimately with our learners as well. And I realize that's not what the purpose of your work specifically is, but it is a very tangible outcome. Great leadership in building means that we're gonna have educators doing amazing things, which then translates into learners that are deeply engaged and doing amazing things in the community.

So I do, sort of, love the fact that thinking about how all of this wraps together because when we talk about the opportunity around interventions, we're not always thinking about them cohesively that way. We see that frequently.

I'm curious, again, this is early days, and yet it's very thoughtful in the progression and the work that you're doing. So, as you sort of think about the journey thus far, but more importantly, what do you see on that landscape as those sort of next sets of needs? I'm curious about where you and your team are thinking about the next sort of iteration.

Mike Caldwell:

I think it's two parts, and they come together. I think one is really honing in on that personalized journey for the individual leader, so that they're coming in with a particular challenge on their mind for that day or that time period, and how can we provide value and confidence of success that if they engage in this process, they're going to be rewarded ultimately with valuable support that's personalized to them?

So, it's really like getting to that level of figuring it out, so that we can kind of ensure that value. So, we're working on that. I feel like we have some good strategy in place. It's just gonna take some time to get there, but I think we're on our way, or at least we're on our way for the next iteration. It will always continue to evolve.

And then, I think the other piece that we're working on too is as we work with these larger organizations, one of the things that we say often to these organizations is, "If you are not providing community, your members are gonna find it elsewhere." And so, how can we help these organizations create a sense of belonging and community with their mentors or with their members in their organization?

And so, that's something that we really think about. And I think it goes beyond software and technology, but really like best practices and the wraparound supports to help these organizations that sometimes are run by one or two people that are also working on advocacy or whatever else for their organization. And so, we wanna make sure that whatever solution we can provide has a full wrap of support, and also is lean and light for them, so it doesn't feel like another big initiative or program. It's infrastructure to help them provide the value that they're trying to provide for their membership.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's always key because we all have 9 million things that we either have to log into or look at on a regular basis or is pinging us about something. Our attention, honestly, is scattered. So, anytime you can streamline those things just make it a lot easier.

I think it's interesting, too, in terms of the way you sort of structured the thoughts about, you know, if we think about the way we want to provide support, and you're thinking about it from a very sort of multidisciplinary or multi-access component, I think that that's really a high value to folks utilizing the service, the platform, or just really understanding how to get the assistance that they need.

I always like to think about as we're sort of wrapping the conversation up, there are folks that are listening to the conversation thinking, "Oh my gosh, this is just in time. This is exactly what I need." And we will provide in the show notes the links and the URLs to get you all of the information. But if you're thinking about somebody who's out there who is struggling in the moment and if there's one thing that you can tell them that they can go and do or use, including... we'll just say you're already gonna say, "Hey, let's go to LinkedLeaders, see what's there," how would you suggest somebody actually get started when they show up there?

And I guess the essence of my question is, yes, I'm overwrought. I've got all these different competing factors. How do I prioritize the help I need, so that I get what I need in a structured way that it's actually gonna be productive? Because oftentimes, what happens when we talk about just-in-time support is it identifies a piece, but it's actually not the piece that's causing the greatest piece of angst, but we work on that thing to the detriment of ignoring the thing that's really causing the bigger issues. So, I'm curious about how you help individuals figure out the prioritization of the issues I'm having, so that I can get the work done that I need to do. And that's work on myself, that's work in my style, that's work in understanding my dilemma. How do you do that part? How do you coach that? That's a big question, and I realize that, and I apologize, but how do you coach that?

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah. When you started the question, I was thinking like, where do you start. If you go to LinkedLeaders, where is a good kinda entry point? But I think when you finished the question, I think it was a different question in my mind. So, I'll answer the second question, maybe come back to the first question.

As I think about your first question is, how do you as an individual, whether it's mentor or coach, help maybe that person that's maybe struggling, but they don't even know where to start? They're just drowning, right? They're just overwhelmed with support. And I think it's so important on the mentor side to start with the what I believe are the right questions and to draw that out of the person as opposed to, you know.

And so what I'll often start with is just what is on your mind, you know. What are on your mind right now? And oftentimes, they'll share maybe one or two or three things. And then, popular second question from me is, what else? And it's usually after the what else that kinda opens up the real kind of issue that they're struggling with. And I think there's just a series of questions that you wanna kinda draw out of that person.

So, they might think that they're struggling with whether it's conflict within their... you know, maybe their staff or whatever else, and when you drill down into it, sometimes it's maybe expectations weren't clear, or communication is too infrequent, or whatever it might be. But that takes time to kind of get there because that person sometimes doesn't realize that that is the root of the issue and that that's where we can kind of provide some coaching and support. But it takes some time to kind of unpack that with the individual to get there sometimes.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. And I would say that's definitely true. It's my own experience as well. Oftentimes, it takes several pieces of conversation, (A), for someone to get

comfortable, but more importantly, (B), for them to really sort of ferret out the root cause of what's causing the angst to begin with 'cause it's oftentimes not the thing that people will first identify. That's my experience as well.

Mike Caldwell:

Agreed. Yep, 100%.

Annalies Corbin:

So, Mike, I want to thank you very much for taking time out of your day to talk with us, to share the work that you're doing. And we definitely will send listeners to LinkedLeaders. Take a look, reach out. But if folks really wanna be able to have a conversation or sort of think about the opportunity that's here, again, you want them to go to the platform? Is it the best way to get a hold of you or do you wanna share some other mechanism for folks to reach out?

Mike Caldwell:

Yeah, I think, when they go to linkedleaders.com, I think as they look around or connect, what we've created is just a lot of different ways that we can connect leaders in real time. The mentorship leadership hub is just one. But sometimes, that feels like a bigger chasm to cross to go connect with somebody that maybe you don't know, and you can just kind of read about them. So, what I would recommend as kind of a start is looking through our wide variety of fireside chats that are offered every week. And these are topic-based conversations facilitated by one of our mentors. And I think that's a good easy way to enter the platform and to get familiar with one of the mentors and have a conversation with other peers as well. So, it's kind of a low bar of entry, I would say, but also creates immediate value on a topic that obviously you're maybe interested in because you chose that topic. But it gives you another way to kind of meet those mentors.

And so, once you do that, and you're kind of ready to maybe connect, we can connect for 30 minutes. They can connect for 30 minutes with any of our mentors and just have a conversation and start to build a relationship.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that. And relationship is everything. So, again, thank you so much, Mike, for taking time and joining us today. We appreciate you.

Mike Caldwell:

Thank you. Congratulations on the great work that you do. I really appreciate it.

Annalies Corbin:

You as well. Thank you.

Mike Caldwell:

Thank you.

Annalies Corbin:

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.